Hearth
Stories
Springtime Fair, 2025

Hearth Stories

Hearth Stories is a digital speculative fiction magazine exploring connection, family, relationships, comfort, and the natural world. For more information, please visit hearthstories.org.

Produced and Edited by Sloum.

A Letter from the Editor

Welcome to our special issue: Springtime Fair! It is almost the beginning of Spring as I write this, one week before the issue's release. You wouldn't know it to look outside. We are a little over a foot deep with snow right now. The wind has howled, thunder has spooked my young child and my cat. Just two weeks ago it was sunny and bordering into Summer temperatures. Buds were coming up out of the soil. It has been a long winter this time and I am hopeful this is its last gasp before we venture into warmer and brighter days, mixed with some nice mellow rain. We planted garlic this year in our raised bed, and I am looking forward to seeing how that goes.

The idea for this special issue is that each of our five stories comes with something you can do or make. The author provides the instructions after the story, and the item of activity is something that featured in the story. We wanted to try out a different way of connecting to fiction and letting it work its way into your life. I hope you find

something delicious to eat, a creative outlet, a new tradition, or something practical to make and use in your life right here in these pages.

This idea came about after a fall filled with crafts. I crocheted until my arms failed me (truly, repetitive stress injuries from the past can seemingly come back quite angrily with lots of crochet, apparently). I always love to cook and to play music. So the hope was that authors would be able to share some of their other interests. I think that happened here and I am really thrilled with the results.

With all this talk of instructional content I do not want the stories to get lost in the shuffle. They are still the beautiful core of the issue, and I am sure you will love them!

—Sloum, Editor

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Crivăț and the Snow Curse

By B. Morris Allen

Sit down at the table here, and let Grandma make you a cup of ginger tea; it'll warm you up. Do you hear that rain outside, hammering on the roof and turning the snow into slush? That's a sign winter is ending, making way for the spring to come. Your grandfather would say, "Just look at the calendar," but he's full of silly ideas, aren't you Vasya? A grunt means "yes."

What do we do when spring comes? That's right, we make a *mărțișor* for each person we care about. In Romanian, that's pronounced kind of like "muhrt-seashore." Your grandfather makes me a beautiful *mărțișor* every year; you've seen them hanging on the apple tree outside. After our tea, maybe he'll show you how he does it. Grandpa may not talk much, but he's a wizard with red and white thread.

And a wizard is where the whole thing starts, really—a grumpy wizard. I'll tell you about it while we drink our tea.

This is a story from the old country—from Moldova before it *was* Moldova. Before it was Bessarabia, in fact. Even before the country was ruled by Bogdan the One-Eyed or his father Stephen the Great. This was back when Moldova was just a vaguely defined region north of the Black Sea and east of Transylvania.

In those days, wizards used to wander around the place doing good. And one of those wizards was named Crivăț, which is pronounced sort of like "Kree-vuts." These days, *crivăț* means a cold, harsh winter wind—the kind that blows little tiny bits of frozen snow in your face, so cold and sharp that they sting like insect bites. Imagine being bitten by lots and lots of cold mosquitoes, and you'll have a sense of what it's like to wander in a *crivăț*. But back then, Crivăț was the name of a wizard.

He was the kind of wizard who helped people out without them even asking. He'd turn up and help raise a bucket of well water, or he'd show up just as dinner was over and the dishes needed doing, or when the straw in the mattresses needed changing. He cleaned the dishes with magic, not water and a rag, but the main thing was he helped out, and everybody appreciated it—especially the kids whose job it otherwise would have been to go to the well or gather

the straw. He was kind, but kind of awkward around people, and he was lonely.

One day in the deep winter, Crivăț heard about an old woman in the village of Tomai with an old, sick dog, and he wanted to help. He made his way through deep snow until he stood on the hill above the village, where you can see the school and the store and the creek down in the valley below. As he looked out, he spotted a young man drawing water from a well halfway down the hill. The man was thin, with short, brown hair like the dye you can make from walnut husks.

Crivăț was anxious to meet such a good-looking man, and he set off down the hill to say hello. But as he walked down the path, he hit an icy patch, and he slipped. His feet went out from under him, and he fell on his bottom. And he kept right on slipping, right on down the path on the ice, until he fetched up against a tree. He wasn't hurt, but he was embarrassed. He looked around, but the man was gone, and Crivăț couldn't tell whether the man had seen him fall. Maybe he'd seen and laughed, or gone home to tell his friends and laugh with them about how the big wizard had made a fool of himself. The fact is that the man hadn't noticed at all, and had just gone home to have dinner, but Crivăț kept inventing worse and worse possibilities until he felt sad, then really sad, and then downright wretched.

By the time Crivăț got to his feet, he'd decided to forget about the man, and maybe forget about romance entirely until spring, when the footing was safer. He brushed off his long cloak, and walked on

down to the valley. Here, the ground was flatter, but some of it was a bit marshy. Since it was so cold, most of the pools of water were frozen solid, but some of them were just slush covered with a thin coat of ice. Walking along, still thinking about his bad luck, Crivăț stepped in one of these pools. His left foot broke through the ice and went down into the cold wet slush. But you know how it is—his body kept moving along even though his foot was trapped, and the result was that he fell over for the second time. This time, though, there was a nasty pop, and a sharp pain in his knee. When he looked at it, his trousers were torn, and his skin was scraped open by the ice, and the knee was starting to swell. There was no one around to help him, and he had to pull his leg out of the hole all by himself. It was awkward and his knee hurt a lot, and by the time he was free, Crivăț was pretty bad tempered.

Now, one thing about wizards is that they can't work their magic on themselves, so he couldn't just cast a spell to make himself better, the way he might have with a snake or a pigeon or a human. The nearest building was the school, but it was empty on account of the cold, and in any case, Crivăț was ashamed to have to explain what had happened, and how it all had to do with being distracted by brown hair. So, he settled his knee as well as he could, tied it up with his belt and some sticks, and slowly got to his feet. He figured he'd go help the old dog, and then maybe rest in the woman's home for a while until his knee was better. Her house wasn't far, so he lurched toward it, sometimes resting against a fence or a tree.

It took him a while, but he got there. He was resting against the wall of the old woman's house when he brushed against its low eaves, and the roof set its whole load of snow loose on him.

The snow knocked him down, hurt his knee, got down his neck, and overall made him angry. So angry that by the time he'd finally cleared the snow off his face, he forgot himself and sputtered a curse, saying "Treacherous snow, may you lie on this land until your white is as red as my own blood!" That's the way they talked in those days.

He hadn't forgotten the dog, but he was so grumpy that he went in, cured it with a wave of his hand, and stormed right out again without saying a word. It was only when he reached the hill again that he realized his knee still hurt, and by then he was too embarrassed to go back and ask the old woman for some tea and a place to rest. Which shows you even wizards can be silly. In any case, Crivăț climbed slowly, painfully, all the way home, and by the time he got there, the damage to his knee was pretty bad.

Even worse, though, was the next morning, when he woke up with his knee still hurting, and thought back to the day before. When he got to the snow falling off the roof, he remembered his curse, and realized what he'd done. A wizard's curse is a powerful thing, and an angry curse is even worse. The angry curse of a good wizard is the worst of all. It's almost impossible to call back a curse like that.

Crivăț spent weeks reading all his grimoires and other books of magic and spells. And all the time, the winter held. It even got colder, though by then it was

March, and spring should have been on its way. He kept reading, and not finding anything, and he kept feeling more and more guilty and embarrassed, until it got to the point where he didn't want to talk to anybody, because he didn't want to have to explain everything, and how it was all his fault. When the old woman came by with her dog to thank him, he pretended he wasn't home. When eventually his neighbours came by to ask whether he couldn't maybe do something about the unusual cold, he grunted and grumbled until they got the hint and went away.

It went on like this for a year, and the later it got, the harder it was for Crivăț to explain everything, and especially why he hadn't told everyone the truth from the start. So, he got more and more isolated and lonely, and that made him even grouchier and meaner than before, until he avoided people altogether, and spent all his time trying to undo his curse. Every day it got colder outside, and people spent more and more time inside. Crivăț consulted tree spirits and water spirits and stone spirits, and wise witches and hermits, but all of them said the same—that they didn't know how a curse could be lifted, and asked why had he cast it, if he didn't want it, and said it would be nice if they could have spring again. All this just made him grumpier.

One day, he stormed slowly through the empty center of Tomai. The school had never re-opened, so that kids had class at home, which is not so fun as it sounds. As he went, his foot fell through the ice again, and he felt a sickening pain in his bad knee. He

fell face first into a cold pile of slush and mud, which found its way down his wrists and neck, as slush always seems to. He pushed himself up onto his elbows, and was starting to say something nasty and angry when he spotted a small pair of bare feet in front of him. Not only were they bare, they were standing on dirt. Not snow, but honest, dry dirt, with a little green grass starting to poke through it. He stared at it in disbelief, his left foot still ankle deep in a pool of slush and mud, and his left knee starting to swell again.

Finally, he looked up. In front of him stood a young woman with green eyes, dark hair, and light brown skin. She was wearing a thin blue cotton dress, and she was barefoot.

"Who are you?" he managed at last.

"My name is Aishe," she said. "Let me help you up." She bent toward him.

"I can do it," he growled, waving her away. He'd been out of contact with people for so long that he'd forgotten that even a powerful wizard can sometimes need help. He rolled around awkwardly until he could pull his leg out of the slush. It hurt a lot, and he winced as he tried to stand up. Finally, he gave up, and just sat back down in the snow.

"Are you sure?" she asked. "Could I get someone else to help you?" She was clearly too small to carry him herself.

"Quite sure. Who would help me anyway, after I caused all this?"

"Why wouldn't they? You're hurt." The woman crouched down beside him and tried to examine his knee, but he pushed her hand away rudely.

"Serves me right," he said, which wasn't true at all, but shows you what foolish things self-pity can make you think.

"I'm sure it doesn't," she said, which shows you what a wise woman she was.

He ignored that, and said, "Explain this," pointing at the grass that was slowly growing around her feet.

"Ah. That. I'm the seventh child of a seventh child." She paused then, but he frowned, because, being a wizard, he knew that just means you're lucky, not that you create your own weather. She saw the frown and smiled back. "Mainly, my father did a good turn for an air spirit one time, and she blessed me and named me. 'Aishe' means 'life', you know, in our language." She was one of the Roma, and if there's a more misunderstood people on this world, I don't know who they are. "Usually I'm just good with plants, but we're traveling west, and when we came through here, we learned that I can keep things warm too. At least, a little bit."

Now, the Roma are treated badly in a lot of places, but the Moldovans like them well enough, and in any case, Crivăț, despite being grouchy and sad, was well-read and intelligent. He saw right away that Aishe, with her power against winter, might help him fight his terrible snow curse.

"Aishe," he started, and then he had to pause, because it had been so long since he asked for help

that he'd forgotten how to do it. "Aishe," he said again, "can you help me?" And then he stopped, because he saw right away that he'd have to explain how it had all happened, and how it was all his fault, and how he'd been sort of an idiot all these years.

But Aishe didn't wait. She jumped right up again, and walked over to his staff, where it had fallen in the slush and mud. It had fallen partly in a puddle, which had refrozen, and it took some yanking to get the staff loose again. When it did come loose, it broke free suddenly, with little jags of ice pointing off to each side. It came up so fast that it grazed Aishe's face, cutting the smooth skin of her cheek enough to raise blood.

"Oh!" she said. But it was a little scratch, and Crivăț still needed help, so she brought him the staff and crouched down to give it to him.

When he saw her face, with its bloody scratch, he realized she'd hurt herself trying to help him, and tears came to his eyes. And because she and her warmth were so nearby, the tears didn't freeze, but rolled down his face and onto the little patch of grass. As they did, a little white snowdrop broke through the soil.

"Oh!" she said again, and as she spoke, a little drop of blood roll off her check onto the flower.

They both stared at the snowdrop, bright white in some places, bright red in others. Then he gathered some snow to clean her check, just as she reached out to wipe the tears from his face. Both of them smiled.

Some people say it was Aishe's blessing that made the winter end. Some say it was her blood on the

snow, or on the snowdrop, that broke the curse. Your grandfather may tell you it was Crivăț asking for help that did the trick—realizing that even when it's embarrassing or awkward, sometimes you can't do it alone. But your grandfather is a little too keen on morals, and even if he is a wise old man, I like the snowdrop theory. In any case, since that time, young Moldovans wind red and white threads together in the spring, and give them to people they care about. They call these little talismans *mărțișoare*, and say they stand for the victory of spring over winter. People wear them for all of March, then take them out and tie them to a tree or bush, so that you'll see trees all over Moldova with these colorful little symbols tied on them.

Nobody knows for sure what happened to Crivăț and Aishe afterward. I like to think they stayed together, maybe with a dog or a couple of cats. Certainly the long winter lifted, and though it gets cold in Moldova still, it always ends eventually, and the snowdrops break out again as a symbol of the coming spring. Maybe that's nature. Maybe it's all those *mărțișoare* that build bonds between friends. Or maybe it's Crivăț and Aishe somewhere nearby, gazing into each other's eyes with a love that transcends both pride and seasons.

B. MORRIS ALLEN

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How to Make a Mărțișor

In truth, there are any number of ways to make a *mărțișor* (muhrt-seashore). The key elements are simple: the *mărțișor* must feature only (or at least principally) red and white, and you should give it to a family member, friend, close colleague, etc—someone you care about.

The very simplest *mărțișor* might be a small (1cm) circle of white cloth and a circle of red cloth, each sewn to the end of a braided red and white thread. Tie a loop in the middle of the thread, then use a straight pin through the knot of that to secure the *mărțișor* to the lapel of a coat, blouse, or jacket. Really, though, the pieces can take any shape, so long as there's a red element, a white element, and an elegant way to attach it to your clothing.

A more elaborate version starts with a long red thread and a long white thread. Tie one end of each to the other so that you have a long thread that's half white, half red. Hold each end of the combined thread and twist in opposite directions until there's

substantial tension in the thread but not so much that it begins to distort. Then hold down one end (you can hold it in your teeth), holding the other end at arms' length with your right hand. Use your left hand to hold the center knot, and pull to the side, slowly bringing your right hand to your mouth. Take both free ends in your right hand. Keeping the tension on the thread, lower your left (knot) hand and raise your right hand. Then let go of the knot end. The thread should spin around, and may clump up. Holding the free ends in your right hand, run the thread through two fingers of your left hand several times to straighten it out. You should now have a nice, tight thread of red and white spiraling around each other. This is the thread you will use to connect the white and red decorations.

Using modestly thick thread, take about 20 cm of red thread and white thread. Lay them across each other in a + sign (crossed in the middle). That gives you, effectively four strands (from the center) that you will braid together.

For purposes of this description, we'll say that the white thread is horizontal (left to right) underneath the red thread (front to back). Take the left-hand white end, and lay it on top of the red thread, below (toward you) the other white strand, leaving a little loop of white thread on the left. Take the lower (close to you) red thread, and lay it across both white threads, to the right of the other red strand. Take the right-hand white thread and lay it across both red threads. Then the left-hand red thread comes back toward you and a little left, crossing the top two

white threads and going *under* the closest white thread. Pull all four threads at the same time/rate (feel free to take your time and pull sequentially in small increments). Try not to twist the threads. That gives you a small, center square of alternating white and red (checked).

Then do it all again with the same threads. The center squares/knots should form on top of each other, forming a little column. (In the '70s, we made friendship bracelets this way). When the column is about 2cm long (or whatever length you want), hold the threads together just below the column and tie a thin thread around them to hold them together. Cut off the other threads (the ones attached to the column) about 0.5cm below the tie-off, to make little tassels. Then use a needle and thread to tie each little tasseled column to an end of your bicolored thread.

That's it. You have a *mărțișor*. Give it to someone on March 1st. They wear it until the end of March, then tie it to a tree branch.

The Confession Chocolate

By Erin Keating

Along the flowering blackberry hedges at the edge of the village, the lovestruck queued outside the sweetshop. As dawn rose, old couples—married longer than most of these sweethearts had been alive—poured tea and coffee for the those lining the cobbled lane.

The pining lovers all waited for one thing. The sweetshop at the edge of the village made chocolate that gave people the courage to confess to the one they loved. The queue inched forward, around the corner of the squat stone building, until one by one the lovers could peer through the foggy shop window at the woman behind the counter.

Mara worked with her sleeves rolled up and her eyes closed. She inhaled deeply through her nose and let her mouth fill with the flavor her customer's sweetheart would most desire.

"Sweet—earthy—a little bitterness," she mused. "Maple walnut. I'll have that ready by this afternoon. Good luck. Next!"

As spring grew feverish with blooming colors and scents, it seemed everyone in the village fell ill with love. The impending Buttercup Festival—a night of food, drink, and music in celebration of the first blooming buttercups—was no help at all. A pretty girl once said that to be asked to the Buttercup Festival was the peak of romance, and it was all over from there. For years now, it had become a tradition that lovers would invite each other to the festival for their first date.

Love was good for business, but Mara longed for a morning spent lounging in her warm bed as the sunlight ripened. Instead, she scribbled order notes and grew lightheaded from breathing so deeply.

"A balance of sweet and savory—a touch of spice. Hmm... molasses. I'll have that ready by this afternoon. Good luck. Next!"

She had hardly enough time to open her eyes before her next customer was at the counter. She grinned at the reedy man with his mop of curly hair.

"Lennan! Skies above, when was the last time you saw this hour of the morning?" She teased her best friend.

"Mara, I—uh—I wanted to get your thoughts on something."

"I'm so sorry, can it wait? I've got a line through half the county, and I think they're a teacup away from rioting. Then I have to *make* these things, and everyone'll collect their orders, and I don't think I'm

stepping a foot out of the shop until I'm on the arse-side of the festival."

"In that case," Lennan placed his money on the counter, "I'd like an order of confession chocolate, please."

Mara leaned her elbows on the counter as she stared at him.

"*You're* sweet on someone? Lennan 'Anyone who takes a girl to the Buttercup Festival for a first date is a muddled-head eejit' Brunty, has come to my shop for *confession chocolate*?"

"I never said that." His face flushed strawberry red.

"So, who is she?"

"For all this about being too busy to talk, you sure are gabbing."

Mara would have stolen the last word, but his brown eyes were wide as a doe's before bolting. She'd seen Lennan through all his ill-advised love affairs—pale-cheeked with pining, swollen-lipped after secretive kissing, red-eyed from heartbreak—even if she never could figure what all the fuss was about. But she hadn't seen him like this before.

She picked up her pencil and closed her eyes.

"Thank you," Lennan whispered.

"Thank me after your lady says yes."

Mara breathed in. *Oranges.*

Her mouth flooded with the taste of them, sweet and ripe as the first one she'd ever had. She'd been a child then, always sneaking out of her parents' bakery to Lennan's parents' greenhouse next door. It had been filled with plants gifted by people passing

through the village on the way to town: a seed and a story in exchange for a warm bed for the night. Coconuts, cacao, cinnamon, sugar beet. All things good and sweet could be found behind the foggy walls of the Bruntys' greenhouse.

One night when they were seven, Lennan threw pebbles against her bedroom window.

No sooner had she arrived at the back door, than Lennan grabbed her arm and hauled her across the small stretch of land between their homes. "You have to see this. Come on! Hurry up, Mara!" Even then, his legs were twice as long as hers.

In the moonlit greenhouse, he presented her with a fruit like sunshine. Together they ate orange after orange, until they'd fallen asleep sated and sticky-fingered beneath the heavy boughs.

"Mara?" Lennan asked.

Mara opened her eyes. She stood at the counter of her shop, fist tight around her pencil.

"Right," she coughed. "Sweet and a little sour. I'll have that ready for you this afternoon. Good luck. Next!"

Lennan grinned mischievously, just as he had when he'd shown up beneath her window. "Right, this afternoon."

That afternoon, flavors slipped sickeningly fast through Mara's mouth as orders were picked up. Though she had to search for the flavor the first time, once she'd found it the taste sprung back to her

tongue whenever the customer was near. Sweet, sour, salty, bitter, collided with each breath.

"They melt quickly, confess your love soon!" She reminded as she rang up each nerve-wracked customer.

Her mouth bloomed with oranges.

She looked up from her ledger to find Lennan leaning against the counter. His curly hair had been windswept by the spring breeze. Mara reached over to smooth it down.

"You're a grown man, don't you own a comb?"

"*Mara*," he whined, decidedly unlike a grown man.

"We've got to have you looking presentable for your confession. Can't have your lady love thinking you're a slob, now, can we?"

For all his crushes and girlfriends, he'd never asked her to make confession chocolate before. She clutched his box of chocolates to her churning stomach. If Lennan was serious about this woman—what did it mean for them? It didn't seem likely a bride would be pleased with Mara knocking on their door at all hours, when she'd had an idea for a recipe and needed Lennan to let her into the greenhouse, or when she simply missed his stupid face.

"Whose idea was confession chocolate anyway?" She grumbled as she handed him his box.

"That's a funny way to pronounce 'thank you for such a wonderful idea, Lennan.'"

It was almost ten years ago now. They'd been eighteen when Lennan stood beside Mara as she begged her parents to take on an apprentice at the bakery because she wanted to open a sweetshop.

"Why can't you be more like Lennan?" Her father had chided. "He's working the greenhouse with his parents like a dutiful child."

"Respectfully, sir, I wish I could be more like Mara."

Mara's father was a hard man to argue with: built like a brick oven with a fiery temper to match. But Lennan's words had been enough. Her parents helped her cover her rent for a squat stone building on the edge of the village along the blackberry hedges. She and Lennan had stood in the empty shop as dust motes danced in the afternoon light.

"People will line up all the way down the lane for your sweets, just you wait," Lennan had promised. "Maybe you can make chocolate for the Buttercup Festival."

At the greenhouse, Mara had created a recipe that was equal parts coconut oil and cocoa powder. Lennan couldn't get enough.

"They melt too fast to leave out for long."

"So? Call them confession chocolate. Tell people they have to give them to their sweethearts quickly. Do that thing you do with the flavor." He waved his hands around like he did whenever he spoke of Mara's gift.

She'd forgotten how exhilarating those early days at the shop had been: how she had thrown her arms around the first couples to have been brought together by the confession chocolate, how she had wept for joy the first time she opened the door and found the line stretched down the lane like Lennan promised it would.

And those very chocolates would be taking him away from her.

"I gave you the best batch right there—don't you go wasting them," Mara chided.

"I don't suppose you'll have some spare time later?" Lennan asked.

Mara looked at the line, growing longer by the moment. "Doubtful. But you've got your chocolates and more than a fair share of confidence. Go find your lady love and let the chocolate work their magic."

Still, Lennan hesitated.

"Don't tell me you're doubting that thing I do with the flavor."

He grinned; she returned the gesture with a scowl. He had looked at her like this a thousand times before: all mischief, and light, and an idea that was sure to get them in trouble. But this time, she thought as her traitorous stomach lurched, might be the last time.

"I'm not a fool. I would never doubt you."

The sun hardly seemed to set before Mara woke to the chatter of the queue below her apartment over the sweetshop.

"Skies above, did they sleep here?" she grumbled.

It began again: the lovesick eyes, the flavors on her tongue, the calls of "Good luck. Next!"

Until a familiar face walked in.

"No!" Mara snapped at Lennan. "If you tell me you queued for *more* confession chocolate—"

"I didn't queue for confession chocolate," Lennan held up his hands in defense. "The orange was perfect by the way."

The tips of Mara's ears burned. But it wasn't because she was flustered—she was just angry with his flippancy. That was all.

"So, did they work? Do you have yourself a sweetheart now?"

"Well, no, not exactly." Lennan ran a hand through his floppy hair.

"Did she turn you down?" Mara gaped. "Because the flavor is special, but chocolate can't make a person fall in love with someone."

"I know that! Listen, I couldn't find the right opportunity to give them to her yesterday, so I ate them before they melted."

"*You're* not supposed to eat them!"

"I know, I know. And now, I have come seeking the time of my oldest and dearest friend."

Mara swatted at him with her notepad. "Don't call me old. And don't lie to me—you said you weren't here for more chocolate."

Lennan shrugged. "It seems like all you're able to do right now is make confession chocolate."

"One more day of this—one! Then the Festival will be over and people will fall in love one at a time instead of the whole village swooning at once. I'm going back to making fruit drops, and fairy floss, and toffee, and if someone orders chocolate, I'll tell them where to put it."

"So, you won't make my confession chocolate?"

"Of course, I'm going to make your blasted chocolate!"

Mara breathed so deep and sharp, she almost choked on the flavor of salted caramel.

The burbling well in the town square. Afternoon sunlight stinging her eyes. Scrapes on Lennan's knees. They were twelve, and some of the boys had been teasing Lennan for talking so much about the spidery orchids that had just bloomed at the greenhouse. One of them had pushed Lennan to the ground. Well, that had sent Mara screaming and swearing like a girl possessed. After she'd kicked them all soundly in the shins and sent them hobbling off, she took Lennan by the hand and brought him back to the bakery.

He'd let himself cry when the boys were out of sight. Mara couldn't stand to watch the big tears roll down his cheeks and being able to do nothing about it. She kissed him quickly on the cheek—he tasted of salt. "It doesn't matter what they think, because you're kinder and smarter than the whole bunch of them, and I'll beat them up with a loaf pan if they ever touch you again."

She'd cracked open a jar of fresh caramel her mom had made for brown sugar caramel cakes. They ate by the spoonful as Lennan dried his eyes.

She hadn't thought of that memory in years—how sweet it all was: the taste of salt and caramel and the sound of her best friend's laughter.

"So, orange again?" Lennan asked when she opened her eyes.

"Well, no, not exactly." She scribbled down her order note. "Don't eat these—save them for your sweetheart."

She'd never had to make confession chocolates for the same person twice, maybe it wasn't unusual for the flavor to change so dramatically. But her skin crawled at the thought of Lennan sharing such personal flavors with someone else. She was tired, that was all. It was making her irritable.

When Lennan picked up his chocolates that afternoon, there were so many customers crowded in the sweetshop Mara had stuffed her cheeks with cloves to keep from tasting too many flavors.

"Give them to her this time, will you?" Mara pleaded.

"I will, I will. What are you doing after the shop closes?"

"The dishes."

"Always so responsible. Okay, I'll see you later."

Hours later, she finally closed the shop just as a sliver of a crescent moon rose over the village. She leaned in the kitchen doorway. Chocolate covered bowls, and spoons, and molds littered every available surface.

Her stomach grumbled. She hadn't had time for lunch—or dinner for that matter—and had she even eaten breakfast?

Something clattered against the shop window.

She ignored it. There were too many dishes and not enough hours until morning. If someone wanted confession chocolate, they could queue the whole night long for all she cared.

Clatter.

Clatter.

Clatter.

Mara stomped through the shop and threw open the door. She hollered into the night, "No more chocolate! We're closed!"

Lennan stood in the small pool of flickering lamplight. His raised hand held a pebble.

"That's all right. I'm here for the dishes, actually." He shoved a warm basket into her arms. "From your parents. Your father said to remind you to eat."

Lennan ducked behind the counter and made his way into the kitchen. "Skies above!"

"What are you *doing*?" Mara chased after him.

He was wearing her apron and had tied back his hair. "I told you—the dishes. Now you, sit and eat, or your father will have my head."

Mara sank to a stool in the corner of the kitchen and tucked into the basket: focaccia topped with spinach and tomatoes, puff pastry filled with raspberry and pistachio, and her mother's bright pink sweet beet bread. She groaned with each new, delicious bite, not caring whether Lennan could hear her over the sound of the running water and scrubbing brush.

She ate until her head stopped spinning, then she picked up the dishtowel and stood beside Lennan, drying as he washed.

"Did you get to give her your chocolates?" she asked softly.

Lennan shook his head. "They started to melt as soon as I got back to the greenhouse, so I ate them rather than let them go to waste. Salted caramel—it was a nice touch."

"I'm starting to think you don't have a lady love at all, and you're just out for more confession chocolate." She swatted at him with her dishtowel.

"No. There's someone, I swear."

"Can I meet her?"

"You haven't had a break in days—you aren't one to talk about meeting anyone. Go get some sleep, I'll finish up here."

"You deserve some rest too! Don't act like this isn't the busiest time of the year for the greenhouse."

"I have my father and three farmhands to help me out. You've got me. So go to sleep."

"But—"

Lennan took the dishtowel from her hand. "Go."

Mara lingered in the door to the kitchen, watching Lennan work in the lantern light. Soap bubbles drifted around him. The sight of him steadied her.

For all Lennan's falling in and out of love, Mara had only dipped her toe in once. She'd been seventeen and courting a boy who everyone said was handsome, but who Mara liked because he was funny. When they'd kissed it had felt like her mouth was turning inside out, and his clammy hands made her

skin crawl. He'd stopped when she'd asked him to, but they stopped courting too. It seemed impossible to have a relationship when she didn't want everything that he expected to come with it. She wasn't sure how to try again.

She wanted a partner—but she wanted a partnership as easy as this: quiet, steady, someone to help her with the dishes and remind her to sleep.

"Lennan Brunty, you're going to make an excellent husband to that sweetheart of yours," Mara called.

"Tell me that in the morning when you're not delirious with exhaustion. Goodnight, Mara."

For a moment, they were kids again and she was waving to him from her bedroom window. "Goodnight, Lennan."

Finally, the day of the Buttercup Festival arrived. Mara woke to find Lennan gone, the dishes ready for the day, and a queue along the blackberry hedges.

"Someone looks more like themselves today," Lennan said when it was his turn at the counter. His stringy curls hung limply and dark circles ringed his eyes.

"And you look like you didn't sleep a wink."

"They'd already started queuing by the time I finished up, so I figured I'd get in line."

"The third time will be the charm, huh?"

"I have a plan," Lennan smiled sleepily. "Foolproof. What's the flavor this time?"

"*You* won't be eating them this time. They're for your lady love if your foolproof plan works."

Mara closed her eyes and breathed deeply.

Heat on her tongue and blooming floral notes. Black pepper. Cardamom. Rose. She pressed her fingers to her lips. This was no sweet memory of Lennan. This was new.

She stared across the counter at her best friend. A flush crept her neck. No, no, this was unacceptable.

She loved Lennan, of course she loved Lennan, but she couldn't be *in* love with him? Could she? Not when he was standing in front of her, asking for help confessing his feelings to someone else.

She hunched over her order pad. "Tell me about your sweetheart. What does she like? I'll make that."

"And prevent you from using your flavor gift—I don't think so," Lennan teased. But then his voice lowered. "What's wrong?"

Mara couldn't look at him, doodling frantic spirals on her paper. "I—I think I know you too well. The flavors are all mixed up."

"No. They're not. Make whatever you tasted."

"But—"

"Look at me, Mara."

She looked up. His face was inches from hers, his lips quirked teasingly at the corner. She noticed them in a way she hadn't yesterday.

"Your ability has never been wrong before, has it?" He asked.

Mara shook her head.

"See. Trust yourself. I'll be back later—after closing but before the festival. I won't let them melt this time, cross my heart."

"Okay. Later." Mara whispered.

He lingered in the doorway, giving her the widest, happiest, most trusting smile that she'd never felt less deserving of. And if she didn't love him so blasted much, she would have hated him.

For the first time in weeks, Mara was grateful for her mountain of orders. The other flavors that swirled on her tongue distracted her from the spark of heat she'd tasted that morning. She melted the coconut oil, folded in the cocoa powder, syrups, and spices, and let it all cool in candy molds shaped like buttercups.

The afternoon rush of people collecting orders came and went without any sign of him.

"Good luck." She gave everyone their chocolates and a pat on the shoulder for the madness they were putting themselves through. It was unfathomable that this many people were in love, and society hadn't come to a grinding halt.

As twilight settled, music from the village square drifted down the lane: the twang of a fiddle string, the steady beat of a drum, the off-key voices of revelers. The Buttercup Festival had begun.

Lennan rushed in breathless. He wore the collared shirt and jacket he usually saved for weddings, and his hair was pulled back out of his face.

Mara's chest ached. It was time.

"Cutting it a little close, aren't you?" She forced a smile. "I don't know what your lady love will think of you asking her to the festival when she's already there."

"Who says this isn't part of my foolproof plan?"

"I—before you do it—"

"Mara, listen I—"

"No," Mara snapped. "I'm sorry. But, please let me say my piece."

Lennan's earnest look cut right through her. He always took her seriously—when she wanted to learn candy making, when she wanted to open her own store, when she had any wild idea that was as likely to fail as it was to succeed—he looked at her with warm brown eyes that made her believe she could do anything. Even this.

"Before you give your lady love the chocolates, you need to try a piece."

"But they're for—"

"I know I teased you about eating them, but trust me. The flavor is off. I think—I think my feelings got mixed up in them. I don't know what happened. My gift has never been wrong before, I—" Her eyes stung. She took shallow breaths, but each time rose and pepper burned her tongue.

Lennan ducked behind the counter and gave her his handkerchief.

"I'm not—my words aren't as pretty as yours. Stop making a face at me and eat some chocolate, will you?" She huffed as she dabbed at her teary eyes.

Mara held her breath as Lennan placed a piece in his mouth. His eyes drifted closed. He didn't chew, simply letting it melt on his tongue—he always ate her sweets like that. Mara studied his face for a sign of surprise or disgust or amusement. But Lennan's face didn't change.

When he opened his eyes, his gaze studied Mara the same way she had studied him.

"That's how you feel about me?" Lennan whispered.

"Yes. And I know you're sweet on someone, and I promise we don't ever have to speak of this again, but if I didn't say something I was going to go mad, and—"

Lennan hugged her so tight she could hardly breathe.

"You muddle-headed eejit. It's you. You're the one I've been trying to confess to, but you've been so damn busy this week I had to keep buying confession chocolates just for the chance to see you."

"So, the flavors ..." Mara whispered.

"Were the ones that *you* most wanted. It wasn't wrong. It never is."

"You—you love *me*?" Mara gaped. "But you know—you know that I don't—I don't know if I can give you what you want."

"What do *you* want?" Lennan asked.

Mara wanted as much time together as he was willing to give her. She wanted his grinning face to be the last thing she saw at night and the first thing she saw in the morning. She wanted to plant flowers in the greenhouse with him and wash dishes at the

sweetshop with him. And she wanted to figure out why she now noticed that his bottom lip was much fuller than his top one.

"I would like to try giving you a kiss."

"Then, we'll give it a try." Lennan bent down to meet her halfway. He closed his eyes.

Mara stood on her tiptoes and carefully fit her mouth to his. His lips were soft and warm. He tasted like rose, black pepper, cardamom.

When she pulled back, Lennan smiled down at her with bright pink cheeks. "Well?"

"Pleasant," she said.

"You can do that whenever you like." He rested his chin on the top of her head. She had never noticed how well he fit himself around her—maybe that's all love was, noticing the things about someone that no one else did. "Now, let's go. The festival already started as you so kindly pointed out."

"You haven't asked me yet," Mara teased. "To the Buttercup Festival—you still haven't actually confessed anything. You made me do all the work, as usual."

Lennan rolled his eyes, but he looked at her like all those lovestruck faces she'd seen this week. "Mara, my love, now that you've kissed the daylights out of me, would you please accompany me to the Buttercup Festival?"

It was the best Buttercup Festival that Mara could recall. Flickering lanterns turned the square a dazzling shade of gold. The drinks flowed, the music gamboled, and she only stepped on Lennan's toes five times as they danced together. All night long, couples

introduced themselves to Mara. Flushed with wine, and dancing, and love, they told her how her confession chocolate brought them together.

"But how did you know my favorite flavor?" The sweethearts asked.

And Mara smiled, "It's a gift."

As the music faded into the night and the villagers staggered home, Lennan walked her back to the shop. They lingered on the stoop, neither ready to say goodnight. Until Mara finally worked up the courage to say, "It's cold out here. Want to come in for a bit?"

She made them tea, and they talked until the wee hours of the night before falling asleep together still in their fine party clothes. It was, Mara thought as she drifted off, the peak of romance.

In the morning, Mara woke to Lennan's arms around her, her face against his warm chest, and his feet sticking out the bottom of her little bed. The scent of chocolate still hung in the air.

"Morning," Lennan said into her hair. "Do you need to open up the shop?"

Dawn blushed across the sky, but Mara snuggled down into Lennan's arms. "I'm taking the morning off," she announced.

Love was good for business, after all, but it was even better enjoyed lounging in her warm bed with the sweet smile of the person she trusted most.

ERIN KEATING

Erin Keating is a New Jersey-based writer, who at any given time is writing either cozy fantasy or body horror—she has given up trying to figure out what that says about her psyche. Her cozy fantasy work has previously appeared in *Hearth Stories*, *Luna Station Quarterly*, and *Wyngraf*. When she's not reading or writing, she's dabbling in whichever hobby has most recently caught her attention.

Confession Chocolate Recipe

Makes approx. 12–18 pieces depending on size of candy molds.

Ingredients

Chocolate Base

—¼ cup of coconut oil (cooking grade)
—¼ cup of cocoa powder

Flavor Variations

—Orange Blossom
    —Orange Zest
    —2 Tbsp orange marmalade
—Salted Caramel
    —Ground sea salt
    —2 Tbsp caramel sauce
    —¼ tsp vanilla extract
—Spiced Rose
    —Ground black pepper
    —2 Tbsp rose syrup
    —¼ tsp cardamom

Instructions

1. Prepare your candy mold by lightly sprinkling orange zest, ground sea salt, or ground black pepper into the molds, based on the desired flavor variation.
2. Melt the coconut oil in a saucepan over low heat, stirring constantly until no clumps remain.
3. Fold in the cocoa powder and stir until smooth.
4. Add the remaining ingredients based on the desired flavor variation and stir until well-blended. Or close your eyes, take a deep breath, and create a new variation that speaks most to you.
5. Remove from heat and pour into the prepared candy mold.
6. Refrigerate for 1 hour.

Note: Because coconut oil has a melting point slightly above room temperature, your chocolates can melt if left out too long especially if left in direct sunlight. Be sure to confess your feelings to your love before they melt—or store them in the refrigerator until ready to enjoy.

Creature Comforts

By Em Harriett

Fox smiled across the garden table at Bluejay as the last trails of steam coiled from her cup. Bluejay set down her teacup with delicate talons and folded her wings along her back with a pleasant rustle.

"It's so nice to chat, Fox," she said genially. "Even though you moved to Brookdale three months back, it feels like I've hardly seen you."

"I tend to keep to myself in the winter," Fox replied. She tried smiling again—*Oh, no, am I smiling too much?*—and figured she was doing a decent impersonation of bark warped by ice melt.

Bluejay didn't seem to notice. The little bird preened a few white feathers from her chest and glanced at the sun over the teahouse's wood-shingled roof.

"I should go," she said. "Oriole and I are flying to the birch grove on a date."

"Have a good time," Fox said.

"Oh, we shall. It's been lovely chatting, Fox—I'll see you at the festival?"

Fox blinked. Her triangular ears drooped as tension spun in her ribcage.

"The what?" she asked.

"The New Leaf Festival?" Bluejay clicked her beak as she chuckled. "It's when we all turn over a 'new leaf' and start the year fresh—that's what Badger says, anyway. It's at the old meadow behind the spinnery. Everyone's invited, and everyone brings something to the potluck, whether it's food, decoration, or even a song or dance."

"I see ..."

"You should come!" Bluejay insisted. "It's a lovely time!"

"I—yeah," Fox said, her muzzle curling up on one side. "Yep. Totally."

Bluejay trilled a farewell song and took off from the table, flying over the chokecherries and across Brookdale's eponymous valleys.

Fox sighed and finished the last of her tea in worried silence.

Fox's thoughts spun as she entered her cabin by the woods.

A festival. A potluck.

She flicked her black ears back and forth, claws clicking on the planks as she paced from room to room. Dried herbs and cotton curtains swayed in her wake.

Yes, Bluejay told me about it, but should I really go? Will the village expect me to attend?

She turned and nearly bumped her snout with her own tail.

I can't play sick; someone will check on me and find me fibbing. If I conveniently "forget"—or flat-out decline—the others might think I'm a flake, or rude, or uninterested in the community I moved to in the first place—

Fox whined, her ears pinned back.

I suppose I ought to go. But what to make...

The question nipped at Fox the next three days, over sun and rain and a drowsy day of fog, until she dug through her recipe box and found an old favorite.

Fox had to stand on her hind legs to reach the shelves and gathered ingredients on her countertop: vanilla and nut milk, almond flour and a fresh lemon, mixing everything in her wooden bowl with a spoon as smooth as her paw pads. She anxiously watched the oven and wrung her tail in her paws while the cake baked. When the cabin filled with a fruity, nutty aroma, Fox set her cake to cool in a half-open window, watching steam coil over the sprouting cornflowers and into the budding treetops.

They'll like this, she thought that night, curled in her bed among soft linen sheets.

A nervous shudder ran through her snout to tail. Fox tucked her face under her paws.

I hope.

The festival morning dawned golden and humid with clouds painted across the sky.

Fox balanced her almond cake in her forepaws as she walked to the festival grounds. Other animals ferried their goods in bindles on their backs or in their mouths, preferring to walk on all fours—or fly in the smaller birds' case—but Fox didn't trust herself not to drop the cake if someone suddenly struck up conversation.

It'll be fine, she thought as she fell in with Otter and Goose. *It's just one cake. What are the odds someone else made an almond cake, too?*

Fox gulped. *Oh, no, what are the odds?*

Her orange fur prickled she shivered with nervous anticipation. Otter tilted his head, concern pinching his muzzle, but Fox forced a smile and kept walking.

As Fox passed a low wooden building with wide open windows, the rhythmic *tp-tp* of looms and spinning wheels inside the Brookdale spinnery one by one went silent as spinners and weavers joined the procession. Mouse wiped his yarrow-stained paws on an apron tied around his middle and scampered ahead, running through five-note scales in his reedy voice.

Skunk greeted everyone at the gate—a worn thing with chipped white paint, part of a fence that hemmed a low meadow abuzz with cricket-song. A brook babbled near the fence's east edge; younger

animals took turns tossing stones into the water while older ones assembled the potluck at a wide oak table. Fox followed the scent of sugar syrup and warm, roasted vegetables to the growing crowd.

"Desserts near the far end, dearie," Beaver said, waving a paw.

Fox nodded her thanks and followed Beaver's direction. Her eyes roamed over the bounteous spread: fresh dandelion salad, frothed oat milk, roasted parsnips, cold noodles dressed in mugwort—enough to make Fox's stomach gurgle. Once the savory dishes shifted to sweet, Fox eyed a clear spot to set her cake.

She stopped short.

Oh, no.

There was another cake.

Fox approached the table's edge in a trance, her forepaws wobbling as she struggled to keep her cake steady. The second cake was taller, wider, and adorned with violets candied in sugar dust, sparkling under the climbing sun like gems. Strips of carrot laced through the three sponge tiers made the whole thing look like a polished stone sculpture.

Fox's tail drooped. She set her almond cake next to the carrot cake and wrung her paws.

One tier. Small and squat. A pawful of sliced strawberries on top.

It's an embarrassment, Fox thought. *I never should have come.*

Fox sighed. She stepped away from the table, her golden eyes downcast.

"Watch out!" someone said behind her.

Fox nearly jumped—she grabbed her tail as she spun around, clutching her brushy fur to her chest.

"I'm so sorry!" she stammered. "I—I didn't see you—"

"Quite all right," said Badger, waving a wedge-shaped paw in reassurance. "Doe here was unraveling her festival gift; we didn't want you getting your paws tangled in it."

"I—oh," Fox said.

She watched as Badger took one end of a garland and walked backward to stretch it out while Doe held the other end in her teeth. From a plied flax string hung dried wild carrot blossoms and heather that swayed in the gentle breeze.

"I admit it's hard to craft with hooves," Doe said around the string in her mouth, "but I did my best."

"It's beautiful," Fox said.

"Thank you, Doe!" said Badger. "Will you be a *deer* and help me hang this from the gate?"

"Ha, ha," Doe said, her eyes twinkling as she picked her hooves delicately over the grass to follow Badger.

Fox chuckled under her breath. She found a spot in the meadow to sit down and ran her paws over her tail in an effort to smooth the stiff fur.

Maybe it's not allbad, she thought. *The others seem to be enjoying themselves.*

Until they see my cake. Until they realize I haven't brought anything worth their time. They'll usher me out with false sympathies and strike me from their invitations to come—

"Fox!"

Fox set her tail down as Bluejay and Oriole landed in front of her. The two lovebirds wore matching garlands of woven buttercups around their necks, the petals casting a yellow tint on their throats.

"Oh, I'm so happy you came!" Bluejay said, flapping her wings. "I was hoping to see you here!"

"You—you were?" Fox asked.

"Of course! You're my tea-talk buddy! Besides, you live in Brookdale; you ought to be part of our traditions, too."

"But ..."

Fox grimaced, her muzzle pulled down like she'd eaten an entire lemon. Bluejay tilted her head.

"But what?" she asked.

"I only moved here three months ago," Fox said. "You grew up here, Bluejay."

"And?" Oriole interjected. "I only live here for half the year. Brookdale still welcomes me."

"Time isn't what matters, Fox," said Bluejay, resting a wing over Oriole's back. "What matters is what *you* call home—not just a place, but its creatures, too."

A bell pealed over the meadow.

"Come and eat!" Badger called.

"Oh, thank goodness," Bluejay said, "I've been eying that sunflower seed bread since I got here—enjoy the festival, Fox!"

She hopped away and took off in a flurry of blue wings. Oriole dipped their beak in parting and followed Bluejay to the potluck spread.

Fox stared after the birds, her head tilted in confusion.

Time doesn't matter, she repeated. *Home is not just a place.*

Slowly, she stood on all fours and trotted to the potluck table. On a flat rock near the fence, Mouse, Stoat, and Squirrel had struck up a tune, singing and whistling in time and filling the air with a new timbre to its cricket-song. Fox had to stand on her hind legs to spoon food onto a wooden plate, and she shuffled shoulder-to-hip along the potluck table. She took a little bit of everything, from salads to mushrooms to fiddlehead ferns, taking each serving spoon from her neighbors down the line. Savory vegetables transitioned to sweet crackers and cookies.

Fox glanced at the end of the table. Her hackles rose involuntarily.

Her almond cake had been sliced into.

Fox stared at the missing slices and the crumbs that remained. Numbly, she scooped a pawful of maple pecans and a single acorn-flour cookie onto her plate and stepped away, her fur stiff as her heart pounded in her ribcage. Other animals nibbled from the slices of almond and carrot cakes on their plates as they wandered around the meadow.

They're eating it, Fox thought. *And they're eating the carrot cake, too. Oh, no...*

She shut her eyes and grimaced, standing still as conversation flowed around her.

"... good bite to it, have to get the recipe from him ..."

"... need to try some of that before it's gone."

"Have you had the carrot cake?"

"It's delightful, but what about that almond one? I love the texture!"

"I can't pick a favorite! They're both delicious!"

Fox opened her eyes. All around her, animals chatted as easily as the brook flowing through its banks, all smiles and bright eyes and muzzles coated in crumbs. Her almond cake was almost completely gone.

Fox's hackles lowered as anxiety shed from her fur.

They don't hate it.

They don't hate me.

This wasn't a mistake after all.

She smiled, sunlight warming her fur.

I'm glad I came.

Fox accepted a cup of frothy oat milk from Hare and sat in the grass with Bluejay and Oriole. Near the stone stage, Badger raised their cup in a toast.

"Thank you for coming to the Brookdale New Leaf Festival!" they said. "Here's to a new year!"

The villagers whooped in joy. Fox raised her cup along with them, smiling broad and bright, and enjoyed the rest of the festival with her home.

EM HARRIETT

Em (she/they) is a speculative fiction author from New England who is inspired by nature and loves to knit. Her work has appeared in *Ember: A Journal of Luminous Things*, *Voyage YA*, *The First Line*, and *All Worlds Wayfarer*. Find Em at emharriett.com.

Fox's Almond Cake

—¾ cup granulated sugar
—3 eggs' worth commercial substitute or 3 tablespoons vinegar + 3 teaspoons baking soda
—2 tablespoons lemon juice
—1 cup olive or coconut oil
—1 cup almond, soy, rice, or oat milk
—2 teaspoons vanilla extract
—1 cup all-purpose flour
—1 cup almond flour
—2 teaspoons baking powder
—1 teaspoon salt
—Sliced strawberries (optional)

1. Preheat oven to 375°F. Grease a 9″ round cake pan or a bundt pan with a bit of oil.
2. Beat sugar and egg substitute until light and frothy (~2 minutes). Add the oil and beat to combine.
3. Add the lemon juice, milk, and vanilla and beat to combine. Slowly add the flours, baking

powder, and salt, mixing until just combined. Do not overmix!

4. Pour batter into prepared pan and tap on the counter to settle any air bubbles. Bake ~45 minutes or until a toothpick inserted near the center comes out clean. Let the cake cool in its pan for ~10 minutes before running a spatula or rubber knife around the edge to loosen and turn it out.
5. Add sliced strawberries to top for decoration (optional).

The Soapmaker

By Erin France

I noticed the smell when I greeted my first customers.

As a peddler, I see all types of villages: Some are poor, some are slovenly, some are rich, and some are so neat it looks like the people tidy the dirt road.

This village looked pretty; the road was clear of debris, the houses were maintained and each yard sported a patch of vigorous seedlings. Many homes and businesses hung green-and-yellow bunting and flags for the approaching spring festival.

But the people who lined up to my cart smelled—not stinky—but powerfully. Enough that the smell seemed like it could stand in line without a person attached. The first man to the cart asked about my belt buckle collection. Waves of cedar and clove assailed my nostrils as he perused my wares.

The next customer, a woman looking for fabric for a special birthday present, smelled as though she carried a lavender farm in her skirt pocket. The

lavender nearly scoured the air of the last of the cedar and clove.

As I greeted each villager, more overwhelming smells assaulted my nose. I started to get a headache.

After two hours, I shut down my cart and locked it. I headed to the nearest (and only) tavern. I hoped sticking my nose in a pint or two of malty brown ale might help it recover.

I pushed open the doors of the tavern and a wave of nausea hit. Valerian? Someone had seemingly coated the entire bar with the herb, though I saw no stick of it in sight.

Valerian grows pink or white lovely little flowers in the summer. Unfortunately, the fresh floral valerian smell is replaced by a moldy, wet foot scent when the plant is dried. Only the best herbalists know how to mask dried valerian (often used in sleeping draughts) so insomniacs will drink it. I have a particular aversion to the stuff—to me, it smells like root vegetable vomit.

I staggered back from the door.

"Whoa!" called the barmaid. "You alright, peddler?"

She came to greet me in the doorway. I huffed a fresh lungful of air, trying to breath through my mouth.

"You're looking a little grey around the gills," she said. "Maybe a pint would set you right? Or, is something the matter?"

"Your bar," I said. "Why does it smell like that?"

The barmaid flushed red. Even the tips of her ears turned red.

"Oh," she said. "I forget until a stranger comes to town."

I waited. And breathed through my mouth.

"Why don't I get you a pint? We can sit out here and talk if it's too strong ..." she said.

"It's too strong for me in there," I said and waved to the tavern with a dozen patrons inside. The barmaid left and I settled on a low bench stationed outside the bar.

The barmaid returned with a pint. She handed it to me and joined me on the bench. "I'm Emma," she said.

I stuck my nose over the frothy, brown drink and inhaled deeply. The beer smelled malty, and toasted with a slight sweet caramel. I sighed, happy to find something familiar.

"My name's Ada," I said. "So, why does your bar reek of valerian? Why does everyone here smell like they've been dipped in their own personal sea of scent?"

"Well, our soapmaker is scent-blind," Emma said. She shrugged her shoulders and let her arms fall to her sides. "We don't notice anymore, it's been going on for so many years."

"Your soapmaker can't smell anything?" I said. "The soapmaker?"

"No, um, yes," Emma said. "No, she can't smell anything. The worst part is she's so terribly sweet about everything. She makes personalized soaps for everyone in town."

Emma gestured to the sign above the tavern's door. A carving of a goat napping on a barrel rode above the entryway.

"She knows that valerian helps people sleep and personally made this valerian-smelling soap for me after I named it The Sleepy Goat," Emma said.

"Well, at least you didn't get soap that smelled like a goat," I said. I giggled. "I doubt you'd have any patrons!"

"That's not funny," Emma said. "She doesn't pick stinky things on purpose. She just doesn't know what things smell like. Or how much scent to use. It's led to some, um, complications."

"Like what?" I said, though I could guess.

"We've had fewer and fewer visitors during the last few years." Emma said. "Nearby villages avoid us. You're the first peddler to visit in a long time."

"Why not just tell her? This seems like an easy thing to remedy," I said.

"I've tried," Emma said. "She's a dear woman, and I keep trying to break it to her gently. But it's just not getting through."

"What are you saying exactly?" I said.

"You know, I mentioned that she doesn't need to use so much of the scent in the next batch of soap," Emma said. "I've told her that a little goes a long way. I told her I would still enjoy her soap if it wasn't perfumed."

"Yeah," I said. "I see why your soapmaker isn't getting the message. You're trying to hide the fact that her soap stinks."

"She's a sweet woman! I can't just come out and say that," Emma said. "She's always helping take care of Old Tom and sat with Margaret during her difficult pregnancy. She made special soap for every person in the village."

"And you all hate it," I said. "And the smell is so strong people have stopped coming to your village."

Emma clasped her hands together.

"Maybe you could talk to her?" she said.

"Why me?"

"You're a peddler. And you're a new person," Emma said. "You can drive your cart out of here tomorrow. If she gets insulted, you won't have to deal with the consequences."

"Fine," I said. "But I'm sitting out here and drinking another pint of your fine beer."

Emma smiled. "Deal."

I straightened my tunic and knocked on Lydia the soapmaker's door the next day. Lydia pulled the door open with a smile and out swirled her newest abomination.

Merchants, and peddlers in particular, are rumored to have something of a silver tongue. I missed this birthright. I tend to be more direct than is strictly necessary. But without guile or pretense, I sniffed the latest roiling wave coming from Lydia's home and I gasped.

"Why—in the name of all things holy—are you making dog poop soap?" I said.

Lydia's eyes went wide with surprise. Then, narrowed in anger.

"Why knock on my door just to insult my soap?" she said. "You're that peddler who got drunk at the tavern last night. The whole village knows you're a lush."

She stepped back, preparing to slam the door. "And I'll have you know, I'm making a thistle soap at the moment."

"Do you mean summer-blooming sea holly?" I said. The door halted.

"Yes," Lydia said from behind the door.

"Are you using the dried white flowers?"

"Yes," Lydia said. Her face appeared, eyebrows together in anger and confusion.

"You didn't rinse off the pollen?"

"No, why would I do that?"

"Sea holly pollen smells like dog feces," I said.

Lydia's anger paused. Her mouth turned down. Her shoulders sagged.

"I didn't know that," she said quietly.

We sat in her garden and I apologized for my abrasive entrance. I told her of the concerns of her friends and neighbors. She told me how she'd lost her sense of smell due to a severe sinus infection early in her soap making apprenticeship. Lydia had managed to pass her apprenticeship by diligently copying her teacher. Afterwards, she relied on her other senses to guess whether a plant would make an appropriate additive. She admitted she thought her friends would've told her if her soap smelled bad.

It seemed salt in the wound to mention visitors staying away, so I kept that information to myself.

I did share the ingredients and recipe for the best unscented soap I knew. Peddlers travel far and wide and pick up knowledge like a crow with shiny treasures.

I left the village after speaking with Lydia, taking my cart past the blooming redbud trees and bright, happy jonquils.

I'm not sure if I'll find friends or foes when I return. Will the soapmaker change her ways? Will the villagers tell her the truth if she doesn't? I look forward to checking in on my soapy acquaintances next year.

ERIN FRANCE

Erin France is a writer and gardener who lives in an 120-year-old farmhouse near Athens, GA, with her clever husband and two excited border collies.

Unscented Soap

—500 grams olive oil
—200 grams coconut oil
—200 grams water
—100 grams lye

1. Measure the four ingredients in non-reactive bowls—glass works well. Combine the olive oil and coconut oil. Heat, if necessary, to liquify the coconut oil.
2. Slowly add the lye into the water a little at a time. Lye is caustic and can cause burns at worst and skin irritation. Lye mixing with water is an exothermic reaction, so the glass will get very hot. Never add water to lye. Only add lye to water.
3. Once all the lye is dissolved in the water, carefully pour the lye solution into the oil. Stir vigorously. You'll start seeing the trace (when the oil and lye water begins to emulsify) in about 5 minutes. Stir until the solution is about the same consistency as gravy. Pour into soap

molds, or a container lined with wax paper. The soap will take about 4 weeks to completely harden.

A Song Among the Prayer Ribbons

By JM Cyrus

"Come on, Da, you'll miss the beginning."

Incomprehensible murmuring that was neither polite agreement nor eager movement reached Maren's ears. She turned her face to the blue spring sky and asked the spirits for patience. *Why me?* Keeping her voice as light as she could stand, she faced him and tried again.

"Da! Come on. Dawny will start without us."

Her father had been tall once. Jacado had been close to seven-foot-tall and barrel-chested as an oak, hale, handsome. With his toned body, gentle hands, and thick hair, men and women hadn't been able to choose whether to be envious of him or fall in love with him.

But like a tree being stripped in autumn, he'd thinned. The dryad stooped on the smoothed dirt path, his shuffle paused, his stick supporting his weight. His caramel-coloured eyes stared from the depths of a wrinkled face in accusation rather than

humour. He unwillingly wore the sequins of sunlight on his dark-olive skin as they fell from the almost-naked tree branches above them.

"Don't know why you brought me here," he said, his voice creaking. "'Oh, he likes trees, let's take him to the middle of nowhere.' If I wanted to be in a forest, I wouldn't have left one sixty years ago!"

When had he become so grumpy? When Maren had been a child, he'd played with her and her two brothers and two sisters, chasing them through the garden, encouraging them to climb trees, always there to clean a scrape and kiss away bruised pride. He used to lie on the grass with them, ear to the ground, teaching them to listen to plant life with all their senses, full of stories of the whims of seasons and plants he'd met.

He'd sung in his rich bass. Some songs hadn't been entirely suitable for children, but with a glint to his eye and a promise they wouldn't sing them where their mother could hear, he taught them lyrics about lady's underclothes and a song Maren still didn't quite understand called "Don't Rub My Acorn."

And now he was cantankerous, dismissive and empty of song. Maren's brother said, "He'd complain about his own feet given half the chance."

What happened, Da?

Maren supposed it had gone wrong when their mother had died fifteen years ago, leaving a hole where a woman should be. The children had been adults by then, moved out and on, and Jacado had been marooned, facing down the winter of his life in

a human nation far from his dryad kin without the reason he'd left in the first place.

A rush of sympathy engulfed Maren. It was closely chased by the frustration they were late and then became flavoured with the familiar bitter resentment that none of her siblings were here. Yes, she was the only single one out of the five; yes, she was the one who'd been taking him to Dawny's activity group all winter; and yes, her work was more flexible. But, still.

She didn't want to keep track, but she strongly suspected she did more than them.

She toyed with listing everything she'd rather be doing than taking him somewhere he didn't want to go, but put that aside to keep her patience at a helpful level.

"Come on, Da, you like Dawny's activity sessions. Some of our winter group might be here."

"Better not be. Bunch of old has-beens."

Why do you have to be like this, Da?

But he walked, his stick a third leg. They followed the path, the ground on either side bursting with crocus, daffodil and snowdrops. The trees thickened. The shade was strange, with it being early spring and most trees not quite with leaves, like a house with rafters and no roof.

Most trees were wreathed in buds like green pearls, but a few had concentrated their efforts on blossom. The white, pale green and pale pink flowers were a bright occasional ceiling, a light fragrance drifting down to Maren and Jacado. A few evergreen

trees were stark in their vibrant dark green against the moment of seasonal change.

Music, up ahead. What started as a whisper through the trees strengthened into a musical rope, guiding them to their destination.

Upon arriving at the clearing, they saw the source. To one side a young man and woman–relatives of Dawny's, given the resemblance–sat, playing a creamy melody on mandolins.

The rest of the clearing was arranged in the familiar way from Hunday afternoons in Ambsand's winter hall: roughly a dozen semi-circular tables with chairs in a loose cluster. Some were occupied. Maren recognised one or two faces from the group she'd taken her father to throughout the bitter winter that finally seemed to be ending, even though today's session - the first outside! - was on a Lemmsday. Two long tables were down one side, laden with what looked like snacks and craft materials.

Dawny was her usual bubbly self. She accepted Jacado's gruff greeting as if he'd been as effusive as her and didn't bat an eye when he sat at an empty table rather than with any of his peers. She brought them glasses of homemade elderflower cordial, which Jacado accepted with a face that indicated he thought he was doing *her* a favour by accepting it. But Maren noticed that after Dawny had left, saying she'd introduce today's activity when a few more people had arrived, her father sipped the drink once, then twice.

Maren said nothing. She smiled and let him have a moment of pleasure without being hounded.

Maren thought of her siblings, her sisters in particular, and how they'd ask her later if she'd made him sit with his peers. They'd imply doubt in whether she'd done a good enough job to entertain him, probably whilst also managing to simultaneously suggest she take him again. They'd likely say something about it being good for him and how Maren, being without spouse or children, had more flexible time than them.

Maren sat back in her chair, the wicker creaking. She thought about her life. The breeze was a touch cold now they were sitting still. The mandolin music coated her, making her pensive. Did she begrudge her siblings their lives? Was she annoyed at how things had ended up? Of course, she wanted a partner, but things hadn't worked out that way, and now at the age of forty-and-change it looked like this was her life.

She sighed, the air cool in her mouth. A few blossom petals floated from the trees, reminiscent of snow. She tightened her shawl against the breeze. The scents wavered, changing from light blossom sweetness to something rich or savoury from the snack tables and then to an ambient woody, vegetal forest greenness. Hardy blackbirds, robins and sparrows sang, hidden.

Dawny had hung purple and green bunting around the clearing, adding party colour. From her seat, Maren could see a large cedar a little way through the trees, its lower branches festooned with prayer ribbons. *How is it Ancients Week already?* Beyond it, she

could see glimpses of flapping colour from more prayer ribbons extending into the forest.

Maren sipped her floral, sweet drink and made a note to ask Dawny for the recipe later. Her concerns about her life choices ebbed and drifted, settling back into their background murmur. The breeze stilled, and she felt the gentlest kiss of warmth in the sunshine, a secret of a summer to come. An almost-peace settled.

"Don't know why you brought me here, Maren," her father said. Maren didn't roll her eyes. He cast around at the other attendees. "Spent my formative years in a forest, I don't need to come and sit in one with a bunch of hippies to remember. I'm perfectly happy in my chair with my newspaper and–"

"Sorry, are these seats taken?"

Maren looked away from the grumpy dryad who was her father into a woman's lovely, open face. She was bent over their table, indicating the two empty seats. The woman's own father stood a few feet away, the family resemblance immediately apparent in their faces if not their builds. The woman's skin was a golden brown, and Maren had a fleeting moment of wistfulness at how she hadn't got her father's skin. She was consigned to skin so pale it would burn at the merest glance of summer, thanks to her mother.

"No! Please! Join us!"

"Thank you!" the woman said, giving Maren a dazzling smile. She hadn't reacted to Maren's bright tone, for which Maren was grateful. She also didn't

seem to be noticing Maren already overthinking that tone, for which Maren was more grateful.

The new woman got her father settled beside Jacado, then sat on the other side of him, sort of opposite Maren. The man gave his daughter a sort of flicking gesture when she tried to organise his coat that, though it was more good-humoured than what Jacado did, was still awfully reminiscent of "resistant father." The way the woman laughed and said, "Oh, hush!" made Maren instantly like her.

There followed introductions. She was named Orla, her father Zammon. She was as friendly as her first impression, and completely unfussed by the not-quite-hostile-but-definitely-not-friendly stare that Jacado was giving her.

Maren tried to work out how to tell him to ease off, when Orla said, "These sorts of things are so good for my father, even though he always protests. He needs to be kept busy, and in the forest too. A dryad needs to be in the forest!"

Though Jacado's facial expression remained stern, Maren noticed his back straighten and how he glanced at the other man. Zammon met his gaze with a smile as easy as his daughter's. There weren't many other dryads this far north. Maren could only remember meeting one other one as a child.

Maren looked at Zammon and wondered what sort of dryad he was. The two men couldn't have looked more different. Where Jacado had the shadow of a much larger man, the broadness and height still visible from the corners of one's eye, Zammon was small, willowy and lithe. Where Jacado was haunted

by muscle loss, Zammon looked made of elastic bands. That combined with a glint in his eye made him appear one dare away from climbing the nearest tree.

Maren turned back to Orla. She didn't have his build, she was plump in a way that spoke of enjoyment, but the whisper of mischief in her eyes made Maren's stomach flip and look away when their eyes met. She found herself self-conscious of her plain, pale ordinariness. From the glance, she thought Orla about her age, closer to fifty than thirty, but wearing it in the way that Maren never could.

"Which wood are you from then?" Zammon said to Jacado.

Maren watched warily, saying nothing. A new friendship, stars above, *any* friendship could do a lot for Jacado. But she knew her father could be thorny if he deemed someone "trying too hard," making things incredibly awkward. Thank goodness Dawny was either too cheerful or too obtuse to put them on a blacklist. There were several tea shops they weren't allowed to go into anymore.

And so, she was surprised when her father answered.

"Wilkrum. In the south." The tone was a little on the hard side in terms of tone, but more like an oak table than, say, a lump of granite.

"Oh, I'm from Weldrun!" Zammon didn't seem to notice Jacado's tone. His voice was keen, almost excited.

Maren recognised the name from the map on her parents' dining room wall. The curve of the Wilkrum

forest spanned the space beyond the Ribbed Mountains, with the wide river of Jumbron all that separated her father's birthplace with the next forest along, Weldrun. Her amazement was swiftly usurped by her father doing something she never thought he'd do again.

He *sang*.

"With the rising sap of the Wilkrun Wood, and every leaf that the treetop should–"

It was the first line of the song he used to sing at every solstice and equinox. Maren's mother would blush in adoration whenever he did. He'd sung it at her funeral. Maren hadn't heard it since.

Adoration for her father and her memories of him, indignation at how he sang so easily when his songs had seemed gone forever, sadness at how much things had changed, pride he had done it in front of her and not her siblings, resentment it hadn't been for her, and plenty other feelings fought inside Maren.

Whilst she sought emotional purchase, Zammon took it in his stride and repeated the same tune with different lyrics,

"With the blossom beams of the Weldrun Wood, and the mighty heights, we do as we could–"

There was a pause. Maren waited, speechless. The other tables were still chatting as if something astonishing hadn't just happened, the oblivious birds continued to chirrup in the trees, the breeze tousled her hair with unrelenting fingers, and everything was precisely the same as before whilst also not.

Maren looked at the beautiful Orla and saw her amazement reflected back.

Before either daughter could speak, both men started talking at once, fast. Their words disappeared into dialect and slang that neither had probably heard in years. Maren heard words and names she didn't recognise and others she thought she did, but they were gone before she could work it out, like bubbles in whisked water.

Maren watched her father talk with more animation than she had in a long time, and something sour stretched inside her. She'd tried so hard to find the man she used to know, and here was someone he'd known for mere seconds managing to get through his armour! She didn't know what to do with her frustration, so she looked away and met Orla's eyes.

Orla gave her a smile with such amazement, relief and joy, that Maren was shoved towards those emotions herself. Though, she knew her laughter lines didn't look like that.

Orla stood. Carrying her chair round the table, she put it on the grass beside Maren's.

"Let's leave them to it," she said, her voice low as she spoke only to Maren. "It's so rare he meets another dryad."

Maren could smell her perfume. It was smoky and spicey, like expensive ink or summer citrus, seasons far away and things not yet written.

Close up, Orla's features were magnetic. Maren tried not to stare. Though Orla's golden skin was lined and her bronze hair had two white streaks from

the temple, she wore her age easily. Maren felt dowdy, her greys haphazard rather than stylish in her muddy brown hair, her skin heading towards ruddy from too much sunburn.

Also, maddeningly, familiarly, she couldn't work out whether she was more envious of Orla's more graceful entry into middle age or more attracted to her because of it.

"They're both such a long way from where they were born," Maren agreed. "I can't believe they haven't met before. Do you often come to Dawny's sessions?"

"Of course we do! I can't believe she never mentioned you to us! We've been doing the Greeday group all winter."

"We've been doing the Hunday group. We can't do Greeday because that's when my sister visits."

"And I've always had clients on Hunday." Orla made a face that managed to simultaneously accept fate and bemoan chances lost. "Thankfully today's a Lemmsday."

Maren felt parallel lives dance around them. What would they have done with a winter of afternoons in Ambsand's winter hall?

They spoke in the easy way of two people who, though they'd only just met, could sense they would like the other person. Maren told Orla of her siblings, the turn-taking with her father which had become a little less taking of turns, and her work with the printmakers. Orla spoke of her one brother, and her work as a deep tissue healer, of the oils she used and the ones that were especially hard to find but helped

her father's joints in a way nothing else did. They discovered they both had human mothers, and both had passed away, Orla's only five years ago.

"We still sometimes feel like we're flailing a bit," Orla said.

"That never really goes away," Maren answered.

They shared anecdotes of trying to keep their fathers entertained, and how that didn't always go how they hoped.

"It's such an effort sometimes," Orla said. "He complains like I'm making him run around the province whenever we walk to the bakery on our road."

"Even with whatever treat awaits you at the other end?" The banter came so easily for Maren. She didn't want the conversation to end.

"Precisely! And it's Himbles, so the lemon and orange crescents are waiting!"

"Oh," Pride whispered inside Maren. "I make the curd for those." She smiled, trying not to sound like she was showing off.

Jam-making was only a hobby. She loved the colour and smell of curds and jams as they emerged glossy and sweet, and how other seasons could wait in a jar until needed. Selling to the bakery had been a lovely discovery. Her siblings had laughed at her, teasing her for a domesticity they hadn't thought she had.

"Really?" Orla looked delighted. "You're an amazing woman to know! How do you make it so tangy?"

Maren smiled and they spoke about the fickleness of fruit. Maren noticed the dappled light made Orla's dark eyes almost copper. Maren found herself sitting straighter under the woman's gaze. She was conscious of how her lips felt around the words as she said them and noticed Orla's lips were a darker gold than the skin of her cheeks.

"Oh, should we be doing something now?" Orla said after a particularly lovely bit of eye contact with Maren.

Maren looked around the other tables. Everyone was despairingly busy, rounding over something on their tables. Maren's desire to keep a teacher happy tightened its fists. At some point, whilst she and Orla, as well as Jacado and Zammon, had been talking, Dawny had coaxed the other tables into industry.

Orla went to find Dawny and find out what was happening. Watching Orla stand beside Dawny, Maren noted how Orla's clothing was arranged in ever-darkening shades of yellow, beginning with collar scarf, then overtunic, sleeved dress, leggings and soft boots. It looked like Orla was emerging from a flower. Maren felt a flicker of pride that she'd just had that woman's undivided attention.

Maren turned to her father. He was still talking with Zammon, completely absorbed. He was sitting straight, his gestures wide and expressive. Maren hoped this whole afternoon would be an indicator for change. *For both of us?* a tiny voice whispered inside her.

She noticed the drinks were running low. She went to refill them.

On her return, balancing four cool glasses between her hands in a diamond, she met eyes with Orla who was at the table with Dawny.

"Thank you," Orla mouthed, her lips curving around the words.

Dawny was showing them how to do leaf rubbings.

"You helped make this paper a couple of weeks ago, don't you remember?" Dawny asked to blank expressions from the fathers and encouraging nods from Maren and Orla.

Maren and Orla exchanged a glance when Dawny said to their fathers, "Now, boys, don't push too hard!"

Maren mouthed "Boys?", and Orla smiled. The in-joke was delicious.

Maren tried to concentrate on the next instructions, but her attention kept skidding with every waft of Orla's perfume. She was aware of how close Orla's chair was to her own.

When Dawny had left them again, Maren watched Jacado and Zammon merely resume their chatter. They did both keep hold of a lump of coloured wax, though.

Maren felt obligated to do something, so she worked on a rubbing of laurel leaves. Orla diligently joined her on the same piece of paper. Maren held a piece of red chalk, and Orla orange, their rubbings together creating a fan of flames.

As they worked, they spoke about their professions. Maren couldn't remember how they ended up there, but she found herself recounting an

anecdote about a more precise client. Maren had spent an entire night blending the exact ink shade requested ("purple, but not as purple as a crocus, nor as blue as bougainvillaea"), when, come morning the client had changed their mind. When pressed by Orla, Maren admitted she'd charged them for the work anyway.

"You're brave! I could never do that, I'm too much of a people-pleaser. But you, you've got principles. You remind me of my daughter. She stands up to everyone."

Daughter.

Maren gripped the chalk, her knuckles feeling like they might come loose.

Her first thought was to berate herself. She'd begun to entertain thoughts that this might not be just a singular conversation. Futures had been opening like vistas through a hilltop hedgerow, and now they slammed shut with all the finality of a mouth closing.

Of course, she wouldn't be available. A woman like that?

Maren said nothing. She looked down at herself, at hands with freckles that were starting to become sunspots, at the muted, slightly mismatched tones of her draping clothes, at the body that could probably have been looked after better, at long hair that could do with cutting and with washing with more than just soap, and at shoes chosen for function over beauty.

She felt pale, wan, washed out. Undesirable. And foolish. Foolish for thinking her luck could change. She'd never have deserved a woman as golden as Orla.

Orla likely had a lovely family and a partner who appreciated her.

Maren shifted on her chair. She touched the homemade paper, lightly fluffy in its imperfections. She ran her fingers over the edges of the leaves, some stiff, some as delicate as filigree. The red chalk smears on her fingertips lightly coloured a leaf.

"You have a daughter?" she asked.

"I have two daughters," Orla said, catching her eye with an expression that seemed almost careful. Orla looked about to say something else, when she looked away from Maren and said, "Where are the boys?"

The two men were no longer sitting at the table. Maren stood, grateful for the distraction but worried for her father. Worry climbing, she looked at the other tables, towards the snack table, the drinks pitchers, and Dawny. They were nowhere to be seen.

"They can't have got far," Orla said. "See? Their sticks are still here."

Maren's thoughts skipped. Where could they have gone? It was all her fault if something happened.

The two women looked over the clearing again; the men weren't there. They asked Dawny, but she hadn't seen them go, and neither had the nearest tables. But Dawny's niece told them she'd seen the two men towards the eastern side of the clearing. She'd thought they were going to look at the prayer ribbons.

Orla and Maren thanked the young woman and headed east.

Maren berated herself as they walked. *How didn't I notice he left? How could I have been so distracted?* If something happened to their father, her siblings would never let her hear the end of it. They'd be entirely right to tell her she was irresponsible and immature.

She'd been swayed by a pretty face. A face that couldn't be hers anyway.

"Not to worry," Orla said in an unfussed tone. "I'm sure they're just off causing mischief somewhere. We'll find them soon."

Maren was jealous of those who could be exposed to Orla's brightness every day.

She tried to echo it, maybe she would feel it, if she pretended? "We'll come across them playing pranks or something!" she said.

They left the clearing and entered the trees. They went to the first tree with prayer ribbons, but the men weren't there. They headed deeper into the forest, following the prayer ribbons like a path.

Maren focused on stepping carefully over roots, going around ferns, and keeping her eyes on the next tree with ribbons, hoping to see her father. She tried to think of one thing at a time.

The birdsong was quieter here. The more plentiful evergreen trees must have held larger creatures to keep the birds away.

Many of the ribbons were bright, but there were also remnants from years gone by. Faded scraps with straggly edges and dotted with small mosses, hung right beside more vibrant colours.

At some point the music in the clearing started again, muted by the distance and the rustling of the tree canopy.

Where could they have got to? What if we're walking in the wrong direction? What if something happened? I should have paid attention. Especially after he sang.

Maren stumbled on a tree root, her stamp on the ground to catch herself a loud thud in the gentle forest sounds.

Orla turned immediately.

"Are you all right?"

Maren met her eyes and wanted to say so many things but merely said, "Yes. Yes! Just stumbled."

"Great, wouldn't want to have to carry you back as well as our fathers!" Orla said.

"Whatever would your partner think!" Maren responded, trying to return to banter. As soon as the words left her mouth, she knew the joke wouldn't land.

Their eyes met. Orla said nothing. Maren looked away.

The women were quiet again for a few minutes.

"Oh."

For just ahead, Maren had seen the glitter of silver of her father's hair. She sped and stopped. Orla came up beside her and both women stared at the scene before them.

The men were sitting on the floor (*how in dreamfire's name did he manage to get there with his knees?!*), hands clasped with each other's, their eyes closed, their backs against the trunk of the broad cedar. Their trousers were dusted with pine needles, the floor

under the tree free of grass but thick with terracotta-coloured tree shed. Their lips were moving soundlessly. Maren couldn't decipher their words.

Both women raised their hands to their mouths. The tears came unbidden. Maren couldn't look away, even though it felt like she were seeing something intimate and private.

In her vulnerable emotional state, the realisation she and her father may have been wrong about what he needed was a heavy weight. He'd spoken for so long how he wanted to be far away from trees, that he didn't need to be reminded of the forests, and he definitely didn't need any suggestions of being taken to the south, no thank you.

And yet, here he was, with a face smoothed of worries, shoulders relaxed and yet full of energy, abandon in the way his head was tilted back against the tree. Hints surrounded him of the peace that used to come from him like mist in her youth, when he used to lie on the grass with her, watching the tree canopy over their garden.

He *needed* this.

I should have tried harder. But underneath, a suspicion rustled. *It wasn't really her he'd needed for this after all, was it?*

He looked so much younger. Maren realised how old he was. Should she have been more patient with him? Or less? Time felt strange, and she was both a child looking at her father and a middle-aged woman trying her best.

She turned to Orla, whose face echoed the same love and pained epiphany she was feeling.

"Come on," Maren said. "Let's give them space."

The women turned and walked away from the forest bathing dryads.

This has been quite a lot for one day. Dreamfire and nightmarks, I hope Dawny has her moonshine flask with her.

Orla cleared her throat.

"I don't, though," she said, her voice low and hesitant.

"What?" Maren stopped and turned, confusion overtaking all the other thoughts. "Don't what?"

"Have a partner," Orla said with a small, slightly embarrassed shrug.

Maren frowned. "But you mentioned daughters?"

"Oh, yes, I have those. But I don't have a partner. Haven't in a while," Orla met Maren's eyes with something Maren hoped was hope. Maren said nothing. "Do you? Have a partner, I mean." Orla finished.

"No," said Maren. "I do not."

Orla smiled, a lovely glow about her face. "That's too bad," she said. She paused, then gave another small cough. "Will you be coming to the session next Lemmsday?"

JM CYRUS

JM Cyrus writes speculative fiction. With a BA in Classical Studies, an MA in Reception Theory, and currently studying for an MFA in Creative Writing, she enjoys finding new worlds, looking at how she found them, and working out how to show them to you. She has work published in magazines, anthologies and online, in venues such as *Inner Worlds*, *Black Cat Weekly*, and *Luna Station Quarterly*. See the full list at her website, and say hello at jmcyrus.carrd.co.

Leaf Rubbing and Forest Bathing

For leaf rubbing you will need: leaves (dry or fresh), paper (80gsm or lower), and a mark-maker (eg: crayons, oil pastels, chalk, charcoal etc).

1. Arrange the leaves on a hard surface (it often works best with underside up, as the ribs provide more texture) and put the sheet of paper on top.
2. Using the edge rather than the nib of your crayon or chalk, gently rub over the paper where the leaves are to reveal their texture on the paper.
3. Experiment with the shapes you can create by doing multiple rubbings in different colours or arranging a picture using the groupings. In this story, Maren and Orla made a set of flames.

This also works well with bark in the place of leaves.

For forest bathing take yourself, either alone or with a friend, into a public forest. Take care not to walk with purpose, you're merely there to feel the expanse of nature about you. Use all five of your senses to explore the area, how it smells, sounds, looks. Find a tree that speaks to you and sit beneath it, taking care not to disturb any plant life, mushrooms etc. Sit comfortably, perhaps against the trunk, close your eyes and engage in mindful breathing whilst being aware of your body in the space. What does it smell like? What can you hear? Is there a breeze?

This works best an hour at a time, but even ten minutes can raise the spirits.

Some people like to recite their favourite nature poem when sitting still, saying the interplay of language with the sounds of nature brings a new level of understanding to both.

Colophon

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